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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Aesthetics of ontological security

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Abstract

Aesthetics can manifest as both vulnerability and a tool of securitisation. Through aesthetic practices, subjects may appear differently than they otherwise would, as aesthetics can function both to hide imperfections and to serve as an aspiration towards achieving beauty. This paper develops an argument on how aesthetics can create security and hope by conceptualising aesthetics as not just a means of hiding insecurity but also an aspirational dimension of ontological security that elevates subjects towards becoming, as it elevates a subject beyond what it once was. For this purpose, the paper develops a phenomenological account of aesthetics emerging from sensual, embodied, affective, cultural, and cognitive experiences. From this perspective, aesthetics is not limited to what is seen or heard but instead shapes modes of being, moods, senses of self, and political imagination, and thus processes of becoming. Through the case study of the candlelight protests in South Korea demanding the impeachment of Park Geun-Hye, the paper demonstrates how aesthetic experience generated hope in a moment typically theorised as a critical situation. In doing so, the article contributes a phenomenological perspective to the ontological security scholarship by demonstrating how aesthetic experience can produce ontological security and calls for attention to creative processes of ontological security.

Keywords: aesthetics; becoming; hope; ontological security; self

Introduction

Autocratic regimes have historically engaged with the arts in diverse and uneven ways, with contemporary times demonstrating an array of examples across the world. Looking at diverse spatial and temporal contexts, we see that, on one side, funding for the arts decreased under Trump's second administration, as he has been vocal about the elimination of arts and humanities endowments; on the other side of the Atlantic, extravagant palaces are being constructed to bring back the grandeur of bygone Ottoman days, erasing other existing narratives from the public memory through a process that is both loud and decaying slowly. Meanwhile, Palmyra is turned into a site of brutal violence and destructed by ISIS, erasing histories that challenge their monolithic vision.[1] On the other hand, in El Salvador, after revealing the El Mozote massacre as part of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, artist and human rights advocate Claudia Bernardi has been encouraging survivors to draw on the walls of pain with an aim of turning them into walls of hope. In the 1980s, a human chain of two million people in the Baltics demanded independence from the Soviet Union. Come 2016, in South Korea, candlelight protests took place as people asked for different political futures. In the heart of London, in Saatchi Gallery's exhibition, we are reminded to recognise the turning point in climate change, where we find ourselves part of the unfolding narrative

[1]Elif Kalaycıoğlu, 'Aesthetic elisions: The ruins of Palmyra and the "good life" of liberal multiculturalism', *International Political Sociology*, 14:3 (2020), pp. 286–303.

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through a functioning coral reef photograph taken by Edward Burtynsky. Both from the vantage of hindsight and in our current moment, what unites these otherwise varying cases is that they all show us that through aesthetics,[2] manifestations and reflections of hope and anxiety are present everywhere, and aesthetics is an indispensable part of political life and our ontological security – and through it, ontological security is constantly negotiated and created.

Ontological security refers to a coherent and continuous sense of self over time and space, maintained through routinised practices and narratives.[3] In IR, this concept has been widely used to explain how political actors cope with anxiety and maintain identity continuity, often by clinging to routines and narratives. While OSS has been successful in drawing attention to the role of anxiety and continuity, it has paid limited attention to how ontological security is experienced and subjectively felt by individuals. Moreover, it has yet to fully account for the conditions under which anxiety makes progressive or radical change possible in a positive sense.

In this context, this paper argues that aesthetics is significant to ontological security as it makes visible how ontological security is experienced, felt, and sustained. For this purpose, I offer a phenomenological[4] account of aesthetics grounded in our sensual, embodied, affective, cultural, and cognitive experiences. From this perspective, aesthetics concerns not only what we see or hear but also how aesthetic encounters shape our modes of being, moods, sense of self, political imagination, and, thus, processes of *becoming*. While I acknowledge that aesthetics and art are closely linked, I do not reduce aesthetics to art or representation in a narrow sense. Rather, aesthetics cannot be confined to art alone, as suggested by its Greek root, *aisthēsis,* meaning 'to feel'. And I will elaborate on why this broader understanding is significant for international politics and ontological security.

While existing studies, such as Steele's *Defacing Power: The Aesthetics of Insecurity in Global Politics*, show how aesthetics are 'employed' to *conceal and reveal* insecurity, I further develop this argument by exploring how aesthetics can *create* security and hope, at the same time embracing the insecurity itself as a creative moment.[5] In other words, the inquiry into aesthetics as a form of security-seeking and how subjects may approach ontological security through aesthetic agents requires a focus on the experience of aesthetics. Moving beyond anxiety management and narrative continuity, I argue that aesthetic encounters, as a phenomenological and affective form, enable political subjects to exercise agency, imagine alternative futures, and generate ontological security through hope and processes of becoming, particularly in moments when routines are disrupted. This does not suggest that aesthetics is inherently emancipatory but rather highlights the conditions under which aesthetic experience can also generate hope and agency, rather than reproducing domination or resignation.

From an ontological security perspective, aesthetics offers a distinct perspective compared to routines and narratives. In the literature, critical situations are usually theorised as producing ontological insecurity by disrupting routines.[6] However, some critical situations may unfold differently, as illustrated in the article's case study of the candlelight demonstrations as an event where an

[2]As Bleiker states in his path-breaking work, aesthetic approaches have sparked a crucial movement to expand our understanding of global politics beyond the confines of a narrow academic field that often ends up reinforcing and perpetuating the problems it seeks to address. See Roland Bleiker, 'The aesthetic turn in international political theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 30:3 (2001), pp. 509–33.

[3]Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (Routledge, 2008); Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70.

[4]Phenomenology is the study of phenomena as the ways things appear to us through our experience and how we encounter them. It focuses on the meanings that things take on through lived experience and investigates consciousness as it is experienced from a subjective, first-person perspective. See David Woodruff Smith, 'Phenomenology', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at: {https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/#WhatPhen}, accessed 9 November 2025.

[5]In addition to what Steele and Subotic address, there is also an aesthetic quality to the duality (in/security) of icons. See Brent J. Steele and Jelena Subotic, 'Icons and ontological (in)security', *European Journal of International Security*, 9:2 (2024), pp. 143–59.

[6]Filip Ejdus, 'Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 883–908.

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affective experience became something more inspiring and hopeful. Aesthetics also differs from narratives, as it may be difficult to capture aesthetics through language. Sometimes the beauty of things or what we feel when we experience things that uplift us is precisely because they are indescribable – their power beyond words. In that sense, aesthetics differs from routines because it is an experience and also phenomenological. While it can be connected to routines, it also exists independently of them, and this phenomenology of ontological security remains under explored. I argue that these phenomenological moments, in which subjects feel ontologically secure, deserve attention, as they are often filled with hope and openness to change.

Drawing inspiration from Gramsci and Rolland's notion of 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will',[7] and in relation to the theme of *creating ontological security* in this special issue, the argument is twofold. First, it calls for a broader phenomenological engagement with ontological security and aesthetics within the discipline of IR. Second, it posits that the experience of aesthetics operates as a hopeful form of agency in the creation of ontological security, a form of agency that exceeds or moves beyond routines and opens new imaginaries for securing the self. Beyond routines, as stated above, in moments of aesthetic experience and encounter, subjects can create ontological security. This is particularly relevant when subjects are denied routines and stability.

I focus specifically on hope rather than other emotions that are often associated with ontological security, such as pride, trust, or recognition.[8] While they may coexist with both ontological security and insecurity, hope occupies a distinct analytical position. As Gentry notes, hope is often perceived as being at odds with the conventional concerns of IR, as it is either too light or optimistic to be taken seriously.[9] Yet hope is what has not yet been determined, an affective process of becoming. Through trust, we try to manage and reduce uncertainty. Authoritarian and totalitarian regimes mobilise pride and recognition to affirm an already established, glorified past or order. Hope, on the other hand, is oriented towards what is yet to be determined, and in this case, uncertainty becomes an opportunity rather than a threat. It embraces change and draws its affective force not from nostalgia, revenge, or the promise of restoration but rather from the possibility of becoming otherwise. For this reason, hope is difficult to sustain within authoritarian politics without being twisted, as authoritarian politics thrives on not hopeful futurity but instead despair, fear, and diminishing alternative futures. Hope, in this sense, enables subjects to imagine and feel the possibility of change.

Therefore, my main inquiry focuses on how the experience of aesthetics unfolds in the process of becoming and the ontological security of a political subject. As our identities are stretched across temporal and spatial dimensions and therefore subject to change, if we distinguish the fragments of our past, present, and future identities, what role does aesthetics play in understanding identity as something that is yearned for, missed and revived after being lost, while also representing what we aspire to become?

The paper proceeds through three further sections. The first examines the concepts of being and anxiety through existential phenomenology and ontological security literature. This discussion highlights the dialectical nature of human engagement with the possibility of freedom, as well as the anxiety paradox that emerges from this struggle. The following section investigates the meaning of aesthetics for ontological security, its relationship to hopeful modes of human experience, and its entanglement with political power. By conceptualising aesthetics as a form of agency, it examines how political actors adopt aesthetic principles to envision new possibilities, challenge societal constraints, and strive for transformation. The final section introduces the case study of

[7]While the phrase originates with Romain Rolland, Gramsci explicitly attributes it to Rolland and develops it as part of his broader political philosophy. See Anne Showstack Sassoon, *Gramsci's Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

[8]For examples of work on recognition and trust within OSS, see Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'; see also Martin Kirsch, 'Mass consumerism and ontological security', *European Journal of International Security*, (2026) with a focus on the role of trust.

[9]Caron E. Gentry, 'The politics of hope: Privilege, despair and political theology', *International Affairs*, 96:2 (2020), pp. 365–82 (p. 381).

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the candlelight movements in South Korea to demonstrate the significance of aesthetic experience in IR and the role of aesthetics in connecting past, present, and future, enabling new perspectives on the hopeful and aspirational forms of subjectivity and ontological security.

Being, anxiety, and the pursuit of ontological security

Heidegger's[10] existential phenomenology proposes that being remains incomplete until death, causing uncertainty. This uncertainty, as discussed in the ontological security literature, often generates anxiety. The human condition, characterised by a dialectical relationship with the 'possibility of freedom', illustrates a simultaneous attraction to and desire to escape from anxiety. According to Berenskoetter, this situation causes an 'anxiety paradox'[11] in OSS. The anxiety paradox arises when subjects strive for the ability to organise their *being in time*, yet are hesitant to fully acknowledge their newfound freedom. Consequently, human attitudes towards the possibility of freedom oscillate between both feeling drawn to and wanting to flee from anxiety. Most of the current ontological security literature fails to allow for this type of emancipatory agency because it is fixed with the assumption that the potential of a 'radically open'[12] future creates an increased level of anxiety and, in turn, ontological (in)security. Thus, it tends to associate ontological security with a preference for inaction and continuity. As a result, much of the existing work cannot provide an argument for the agency of actors who have the ability to make meaningful decisions, and who thus want to escape existing mechanisms and pursue radical forms of liberation.[13]

In addition, while the existing literature focuses heavily on anxiety and continuity of the sense of self, it does not systematically address how individuals feel like they are experiencing ontological security, nor do they fully explain the conditions under which anxiety makes progressive or radical change in a positive sense possible. Therefore, there is analytical value in greater empirical attention to experiences of ontological security.[14] While anxiety is often perceived as destabilising and weakening, it can also serve as a catalyst for creativity and radical agency.[15] In this context, Gustafsson proposes that identity change not only stems from anxiety but is also facilitated by its connection to creativity. Anxiety creates circumstances that disrupt existing identities and promote the development of, as well as openness to, new concepts and self-perceptions.[16] Anxiety here is not only a reaction or a source of rupture but also a condition through which meaning is made in a new way.

Ontological security, then, not only is the protection of what is known but also opens up a creative space where the known can be shaped, and the familiar dissolves to make way for the yet-to-be imagined. In this light, existential perspectives[17] on ontological security have increasingly

[10]Engaging with Heidegger's phenomenology of human existence does not imply my endorsement of his political affiliations.

[11]Felix Berenskoetter, 'Anxiety, time and agency', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 273–90 (p. 273).

[12]Ibid.; Patricia Greve, 'Ontological security, the struggle for recognition, and the maintenance of security communities', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21 (2018), pp. 858–82; Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'. For instance, a Google Scholar search of 'emancipation and ontological security' turns up few studies.

[13]Brent J. Steele and Cornelia Baciu mention this tendency in OSS in 'Creating Ontological Security', *European Journal of International Security*, (2026).

[14]See Ejdus, 'Critical situations'; Alexandra Homolar and Ronny Scholz, 'The power of Trump-speak: Populist crisis narratives and ontological security', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 344–64; Bahar Rumelili, 'Integrating anxiety into international relations theory: Hobbes, existentialism, and ontological security', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 257–72.

[15]Nicolai Gellwitzki, 'The positions of ontological (in)security in international relations: Object relations, unconscious phantasies, and anxiety management', *International Theory*, 17:1 (2025), pp. 118–50 (p. 2); Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47 (p. 32).

[16]Karl Gustafsson, 'Identity change, anxiety and creativity: How 19th century Japan sought to leave Asia and become part of the West', *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi*, 19:73 (2022), pp. 77–93 (p. 78).

[17]See Berenskoetter, 'Anxiety, time and agency'; Gustafsson, 'Identity change, anxiety and creativity'.

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recognised anxiety's capacity to initiate creative possibilities. From this perspective, anxiety is multilayered, moves across registers, and cannot be confined to a unitary notion of experience. In that sense, Fakhoury and Gricius's paper on eco-anxiety in this special issue is particularly resonant, as it not only points out one of the variegated dimensions of anxiety but also depicts its creative potential by showing how shared environmental anxieties catalyse new solidarities and mutual recognition around these shared experiences and inspire positive collective action.[18] Furthermore, if we assume state consciousness[19] and personhood,[20] then wouldn't framing the feeling of anxiety as a universal explanatory lens become a reductionist perspective on all sorts of modalities that a state could be in? These also resonate with Butler's argument on the importance of the relationship between anxiety, hope, and imagination in grappling with the urgent existential questions of our time. Even when people say that there is no future and hope, Butler argues that they still engage in imaginative acts that contain possibilities for hope.[21] This then raises the inquiry of how anxiety results in or leads to an uplifting transformative change, and how this process happens.

Lerner's reflection on how justice is a necessary precondition for ontological security[22] reminds us that ontological security is a process of reconstruction and not a pre-existing condition. While the OSS literature often focuses on disruptions and anxiety, from an epistemological perspective, it paradoxically treats ontological insecurity as a given. This tendency reinforces the idea of ontological security itself as a fixed and stable condition, rather than a dynamic and contested process. Therefore, security is treated as a presumed baseline disrupted by moments of crisis or anxiety. This framing risks obscuring the fact that for many actors, particularly those historically marginalised or postcolonial, ontological security is never guaranteed but rather something actively sought, often in the shadow of enduring trauma and exclusion. By shifting our analytical focus from ontological *in*security to the processes or experiences through which ontological security is pursued, we can better understand how subjects experience suffering grow positively around, and claim their agency and imagine their future selves in, contexts of collective trauma and instability.

While often criticised for its focus on continuity over change,[23] ontological security does, in fact, hold the potential to facilitate the adoption of positive self-conceptions. Within this context, anxiety emerges as not only a source of disruption but also a catalyst for change, potentially initiating the redefinition of previously acknowledged 'stable' identities, especially during critical situations that challenge the agencies' sense of self. It can also emerge when agencies perceive others as imposing identities upon them, pushing them to redefine themselves to maintain distinctiveness. Therefore, being ontologically secure should instead entail that the 'self' is continuously 'reconstituted' and reshaped through evolving knowledge structures that are embedded in narratives and integrated into the process of identification.[24] Despite the limitations, recognising the variegated behavioural effects of anxiety allows for understanding both the presence and absence of change, particularly in cases of radical identity shifts. By doing so, it offers a better grasp of the relationship between anxiety and change.[25]

[18]See Renato Fakhoury and Gabriela Gricius, 'Eco-anxiety and the self in a warming world: Conceptualizing ontologically insecure communities', *European Journal of International Security*, (2026).

[19]Adam B. Lerner, 'What's it like to be a state? An argument for state consciousness', *International Theory*, 13:2 (2021), pp. 260–86.

[20]Nina C. Krickel-Choi, 'State personhood and ontological security as a framework of existence: Moving beyond identity, discovering sovereignty', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 37:1 (2024), pp. 3–21.

[21]Judith Butler, 'To imagine a world after this, democracy needs the humanities', Literary Hub, available at: {https://lithub.com/judith-butler-to-imagine-a-world-after-this-democracy-needs-the-humanities/}, accessed 20 May 2025.

[22]Adam B. Lerner, 'Global injustice and the production of ontological insecurity', *European Journal of International Relations,* 30:3 (2023), pp. 1–24.

[23]Trine Flockhart, 'The problem of change in constructivist theory: Ontological security seeking and agent motivation', *Review of International Studies*, 42:5 (2016), pp. 799–820 (p. 806).

[24]Ibid.

[25]Nina C. Krickel-Choi, 'The concept of anxiety in ontological security studies', *International Studies Review*, 24:3 (2022), pp. 1–21; Gustafsson, 'Identity change, anxiety and creativity'; see Karl Gustafsson and Nina C. Krickel-Choi,

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This interpretation finds inspiration in Giddens's argument that self-identity is not just given as a result of the continuities of the individual's action-system. Self-identity is not simply a product of past actions but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual, an ongoing process requiring active engagement and reflection.[26] In this way, Gustafsson examines Japan's transformation in the nineteenth century as it endeavoured to shift its perception from an Asian power to a modernised, Westernised nation by delving into the interaction between identity change, anxiety, and creativity within Japan's societal and political spheres during a period of drastic modernisation, namely the Meiji Restoration. By examining various cultural, political, and economic conditions, Gustafsson demonstrates how Japan's aspirations to align itself with Western powers led to internal tensions and anxieties within the country, while simultaneously producing creative responses and innovations. Thus, he provides insight into the dynamic processes through which nation-states negotiate identity, navigate anxiety, and promote creativity in their pursuit of societal transformation and global recognition.[27]

Other contributions to this special issue disclose this dynamic potential. Kurylo's paper on Ukraine's railway system illustrates how, in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, critical infrastructure has been reimagined as a creative platform for constructing ontological security.[28] From a similar perspective, Kirke argues that political myths function as a 're-enabler' of ontological security in times of crisis, illustrating their cognitive, integrative, and mobilising effects in the aftermath of several terrorist attacks in the UK in 2017.[29]

Aligning these perspectives is the notion of human existence embedded in three dimensions that are social, spatial, and temporal: a person has a current sense of self, a past sense of self that may have been lost or preserved, and a future sense of self that they aspire to become. In this context, our being/the Selves are shaped by our actions, our stories, and our aspirations. We all have idealised versions of ourselves that we want to become, envisioning where we want to go. For instance, a teenager eagerly anticipates turning eighteen, dreaming of it as a transformative milestone into adulthood and planning what they will do when that time arrives, as if age eighteen is a turning point in a person's life towards adulthood. Similarly, individuals may imagine achieving their dream life by age thirty, as if they would figure everything out and have the dream life they want. Moreover, many express the belief that achieving certain goals or possessions will lead to happiness and contentment: 'once I become … or do … or have … I will be very happy and content'. In a related manner, as Drigotas et al. argue, when we are in love, we tend to want to have the qualities that the person we love might prefer. We would like to *become* their ideal type.[30] These

'Returning to the roots of ontological security: Insights from the existentialist anxiety literature', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:3 (2020), pp. 875–95; Marco A. Vieira, 'Understanding resilience in international relations: The non-aligned movement and ontological security', *International Studies Review*, 18:2 (2016), pp. 290–311; Jelena Subotic, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 610–27; Linus Hagström and Karl Gustafsson, 'Japan and identity change: Why it matters in international relations', *The Pacific Review*, 28:1 (2015), pp. 1–22; Emma Hutchison, 'Trauma and the politics of emotions: Constituting identity, security and community after the Bali bombing', *International Relations*, 24:1 (2010), pp. 65–86; Browning and Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity'; Bahar Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties* (Routledge, 2015); Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*; Karl Gustafsson, 'Routinised recognition and anxiety: Understanding the deterioration in Sino–Japanese relations', *Review of International Studies*, 42:4 (2016), pp. 613–33; May Darwich, 'The ontological (in)security of similarity: Wahhabism versus Islamism in Saudi foreign policy', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:3 (2016), pp. 469–88.

[26]Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 52.

[27]Gustafsson, 'Identity change, anxiety and creativity'.

[28]Bohdana Kurylo, 'The iron road home: Ukrainian Railways, resilience and ontological security under Russia's terror',*European Journal of International Security*, (2026).

[29]See Xander Kirke, 'Political myth and the generation of ontological security: The case of UK responses to terrorism', *European Journal of International Security*, (2026).

[30]S. M. Drigotas, C. E. Rusbult, J. Wieselquist, and S. W. Whitton, 'Close partner as sculptor of the ideal self: Behavioral affirmation and the Michelangelo phenomenon', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77:2 (1999), pp. 293–323.

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examples highlight the aspirational nature of identity formation, showing how our actions and desires, not necessarily coming from a place of lack, as Lacan suggests, shape our sense of self.

This forward-looking or -oriented nature is not just a sense of 'lack' that needs to be filled. Instead, it is different in multiple respects. First, it does not need to be filled; it is something that is just better and more aspirational than the current Self, without being accompanied by pain. Another is that it can be found in the moments of experience, not only in a process of flow.[31] Moreover, the purpose of modern psychoanalysis is to bring individuals beyond their entrapment in various infantile stages or different forms of neurosis, resulting in progress and development. It emphasises the human capacity to move beyond psychological fixations and develop towards maturity. Yet, from a Lacanian perspective, there is no hope overall, and such an emancipatory opening is foreclosed. If we are to move beyond trauma and improve the lives of the oppressed and marginalised, then Lacanian accounts of ontological security in IR, despite their analytical strength in diagnosis, remain insufficient without a venue for political transformation and risk reproducing political paralysis by treating trauma and lack as ontological constants rather than historically contingent conditions open to transformation.

Aesthetics of ontological security: Hopeful mode of being and agency

If we were to contextualise these discussions within the aesthetics debate, I conceptualise aesthetics as something that is embedded in many ordinary activities that we experience through our senses, bodies, cognition, and affects, and how those experiences and aesthetic relationalities shape our being, our sense of self, and our political imaginaries, and in turn serve to *becoming*. Steele explains the transformative potential of incorporating aesthetic approaches into the study of IR and underscores the analytical leverage of it along with emotions, and subjective interpretations in understanding global politics, which have been overlooked by conventional IR theories. He further calls 'scholars of visual studies to be attentive to not only what is *seen* and viewed but to what has been hidden'[32] and to think about 'pedagogy as a form of aesthetic action'.[33] According to Steele, the aesthetic turn sheds light on understanding insecurity, opens new ways of seeing and interpreting the world, challenges dominant paradigms, and offers inclusive and diverse standpoints with emancipatory potential.[34] Yet in his important intervention, instead of investigating the transformative potential (particularly its hopeful possibilities) of the phenomena, and despite stating that his point goes beyond the 'cosmetic', he utilises it as the aesthetic layer of power leading to insecurity, which appears to confine aesthetics within the limits of the cosmetic. There, Steele argues that the insecurity arises because the purpose of aesthetics is to make objects appear differently than they otherwise were, and it creates the Self other than it may be.[35]

Yet, is the most important purpose of aesthetics solely to make objects appear differently than they are? To illustrate, one of the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders performs without her wig to raise awareness for alopecia. In that gesture, when that aesthetic layer of the wig goes away, insecurity emerges, but for a brief moment. Yet that vulnerability becomes a source of strength, and there is empowerment in the insecurity of exposing it. In that positivity of reclaiming the Self through being true or real, vulnerability may also have an inspirational quality to it rather than being destructive. Moreover, what happens when we see an aesthetically pleasing image, for instance? Aesthetics can be something to hide imperfections, but aesthetics can also be an aspiration and beautiful in its own right. When we see an aesthetically pleasing image, we are not just confronted with superficial

[31]See Brent J. Steele, 'Re-creating ontological security: Flow and optimal experience', *European Journal of International Security*, (2026).

[32]Brent J. Steele, 'Recognising, and realising, the promise of the aesthetic turn', *Millennium*, 45:2 (2016), pp. 206–213 (p. 211).

[33]Ibid., p. 212.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Brent J. Steele, *Defacing Power: The Aesthetics of Insecurity in Global Politics* (University of Michigan Press, 2012), p. 42.

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allure; aesthetics also elevates our spirits, makes us happy, lifts up our souls with contentment. Thus, aesthetics can be considered as an aspiration or a guiding light for aspiration.

In that sense, aesthetics enables a shift from being to becoming, also making it inherently expressivist as it allows us to trace how meaning, form, and perception emerge through lived enactment.[36] Furthermore, this invites an inquiry into the role that aesthetics plays in the formation of identity and its interaction with political dynamics. The aesthetic manifestation of being/the Self is also embedded and reflected in the Self's social relations. This process reveals how aesthetic formation of the Self is related to power and simultaneously shapes and is shaped by structures of authority and recognition. Understanding this relationship provides, from a fresh angle, important insights into how identities are constructed, negotiated, and performed within social and political contexts. In turn, this prompts us to consider how agency and power are experienced and expressed through aesthetic modes. Thus, the way we conceptualise agency is closely linked to our understanding of how aesthetics matters to politics.

In this light, the notion of an agency that is hopeful for emancipation becomes particularly relevant as this paradox reflects the inclination of self-aware individuals, grappling with the freedom inherent in existing within time, to associate themselves with constructs that offer a feeling of temporal consistency or assurance. The comforting structure hinders the Self from actualising or expressing its being and agency and 'prevents the Self from "true" being and acting'.[37] Berenskoetter argues that emancipatory agency, as closely tied to the notion of enlightenment as a form of liberation, becomes apparent through the recognition of having choices and the 'courage to use one's own mind'. Temporally, it envisions the future and, to some extent, the past as open realms. This agency is exemplified in the journeys of characters like Ulysses and Adam, who become aware of their ability to act differently. Thus, it is not only an inherent agency but also a growing awareness of possessing agency that challenges existing societal constraints, aiming to liberate one's being from these limitations. It is embodied in a subject that acts upon the belief that circumstances can be altered and has confidence in its capacity to transform its existence in the world. Ernesto Laclau describes this type of agency as creating an 'absolute chasm … between the emancipatory moment and the social order that has preceded it'.[38] Such an understanding of emancipation underscores the importance of reimagining political subjectivity and agency.[39]

This radical agency is most evident in the initiation of revolts against established political orders and their governing systems. Those who disrupt the order and challenge the system may be celebrated as 'strong', 'inspirational', or even 'heroic' by those anticipating liberation, while being labelled as 'foolish', 'dangerous', and 'destructive' by those comfortably entrenched in the existing order.[40] Put differently, reflexive individuals confront a world that is open, undecided, and fundamentally uncertain, a condition that brings both freedom and anxiety. Similarly, Kierkegaard understands anxiety as arising from the ability to choose and from the endless range of possibilities.[41] Anxiety emerges when this openness is viewed through the lens of potential danger, whereas, in Bloch's view, hope, when accompanied by awareness and an acknowledgement of risk, directs attention towards possibility and focuses on what is possible.[42] In this way, the very source of anxiety can be transformed into hope, where the use of radical forms of agency is enabled. Because anxiety and hope are dialectically connected, embracing anxiety makes possible the creation of hope within conditions of uncertainty as well as the transformation of anxiety itself into hope.[43]

[36]See Cornelia Baciu, 'Express your self: Expressivism and ontological security'.

[37]Berenskoetter, 'Anxiety, time and agency', p. 285.

[38]Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (Verso, 1996), p. 1.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Berenskoetter, 'Anxiety, time and agency'.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1 (The MIT Press, 1995).

[43]See Brent J. Steele and Cornelia Baciu, 'Creating ontological security: Introduction to special issue, *European Journal of International Security*, (2026)'; and Chris S. Browning, '"Je suis en terrasse": Political violence, civilizational politics, and the everyday courage to be', *Political Psychology*, 39:2 (2018), pp. 243–61.

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From this perspective, to deal with the anxiety and insecurity stemming from uncertainties, subjects might turn to aspiration. With the desire to *become*, what happens when anxiety turns into hope? The transition from anxiety to hope is a significant aspect, where anxiety dialectically coexists with hope.[44] Anxiety may evolve into fear, but it may also evolve into hope. In this context, this transformation leads to an inquiry into how subjects cope with their ontological insecurities and strive for ontological security through hope and aspiration, as well as the role aesthetics may play in this process. In this case, if we are to recognise the fragments of the self across the past, present, and future as interwoven and entangled through temporal and spatial dimensions, aesthetics plays a significant role in shaping this continuum by framing the self as an ongoing process of becoming, continually reimagined in relation to what we aspire to become. In that sense, it holds the potential to bridge the gap between who we once were and who we hope to become when the yearning self is a part of a subject's aspiration. Aesthetics emerges here, then, as a potential tool for reconciling between the past and aspirations for future selves. Through aesthetic forms, subjects *become* part of a forward-looking imaginary while reconciling between nostalgia and aspiration. In this way, aesthetics emerges as a tool of temporal mediation in the process of future-oriented self formation. Therefore, through it, we can gain deeper insights into its role in shaping our evolving sense of self. In this context, it invites us to consider how political subjects narrate themselves through aesthetic means in the realm of international relations.

In this context, I argue that aspirations serve as coping mechanisms for anxiety and uncertainty, driving subjects towards their envisioned identities and spaces. Aesthetics, with its potential to inspire and motivate, can serve as a creative tool for realising these aspirations, helping subjects shape their identities and environments in line with their visions. Thus, aesthetics can be perceived as a means of and the agency for actualising aspirations and navigating the complexities of human existence in a world characterised by uncertainty and change. We may also dream of coping with anxiety and uncertainty from a more hopeful space. We aspire to *be*, or *become*, and strive to go in the direction that we aspire to and make meaningful decisions based on that. We may benefit from some tools that help inspire us.[45]

Thinking about aesthetics through the lens of ontological security iteratively, and approaching one dimension of aesthetics as the experience of the perceived, *being in the world* is shaped considerably by 'experience' in existential phenomenology. Accordingly, aesthetics shapes our being in the world. This also prompts the thought of seeking or creating ontological security beyond the routines but also in affective and embodied experiences, experiences that are not necessarily routinised but instead bound up with cognitive flexibility, the broadening of the self, or in the moments that we articulate our grievances. As Steele highlights in his contribution to this special issue, such experiences also happen through a sense of *flow*.[46]

Thus, aesthetics can be both stabilising or disruptive. However, it also holds the potential to be disruptive in hopeful ways that lead to positive change. It can be disruptive and open up new ways of thinking about the world. Put differently, aesthetics possesses the potential to disrupt or change the status quo, and it might be creative or stimulate possibly radical transformations. Rather than simply being a linear projection of the present onto the future, aesthetics can spark reimagining of the self. This might still be constrained by existing narratives, but at the same time it can constitute novel interpretations and fresh perspectives. In this regard, Edward Burtynsky's coral reef[47] photograph serves as a good example; displayed at the Saatchi Gallery in London, it aims to inspire positive action through the portrayal of uplifting feelings found in the coral reef's vitality. As an advocate for sustainability, Burtynsky uses his exhibition to move the environmental conversation forward by revealing the state we are in within the unfolding climate crisis rather than

[44] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*.

[45] See Baciu, 'Express your self'.

[46] Steele, 'Re-creating ontological security'.

[47] I am grateful to Pauline Heinrichs for suggesting this example. See the photo, available at: {https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/projects/photographs/anthropocene}.

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placing blame. As he notes, 'It is about ending on hope – the fact that we still have biodiversity with us'.[48] Similarly, Brazilian samba schools emerged from favela communities that gained popularity in Rio de Janeiro in the 1920s as a response to police oppression against Afro-Brazilians, who were often targeted for their street carnival practices. As they organised world-famous carnivals with decorated floats, embellished costumes, and samba dancing in the parade, these schools became sites of an aesthetic practice through which resistance is embodied, performed, and made visible. They provided spaces for cultural resistance for *blocos* (neighbourhood groups) and symbolised resistance and hope.[49]

While aesthetic approaches in IR have largely focused on representation, disruption, and the political function of art,[50] there remains a relative lack of phenomenological or experiential engagement with aesthetics and its implications for security. Disruption does not need to be negative; it can change our thinking in a positive way. In moments of disruption, we reconfigure our patterns of thinking. In this regard, I incline towards and advocate a more phenomenological understanding of aesthetics in IR, arguing that aesthetics is beyond art, which is the affect left within us by the things we experience and perceive in the world. Put differently, it is a quality. The general perception is that aesthetics is linked to beautiful or ugly things, yet such judgements are inherently subjective, shaped by the eye of the beholder as to whether we find something beautiful or ugly. Therefore, it is experienced in diverse ways.

Case study: Candlelight revolution in South Korea

In this section, I address how the concrete manifestation of the aesthetics we identify with can occur and be understood in different ways, particularly through the aesthetics of what gives us hope or agency. Inquiring into phenomenological venues of aesthetics in international relations, elaborating on aesthetic identity, involves examining how subjects construct and express their identities through aesthetics. The inquiry extends to whether aesthetics can function as a form of agency, acknowledging the insecurities of existence while embracing the potential for freedom.

I turn to the case study of the candlelight protests to illustrate my theoretical points. The case shows two interrelated dynamics. First, it demonstrates how an aesthetic experience can emerge in a moment of political crisis that might otherwise be understood as ontologically destabilising. Second, it shows how this experience differs from routinised practices and how such affective experiences enabled participants to imagine political change and to feel themselves as capable political agents, therefore transforming anxiety into hope.

In late October 2016, a corruption scandal involving South Korean president Park Geun-Hye and her confidante, Choi Soon-sil, the daughter of a notorious shaman, erupted,[51] alleging that President Park shared top-secret government documents with Choi. Following the scandal, accusations of corruption and abuse of power led to massive protests by the public, namely the 'people

[48] Ravi Ghosh, 'Edward Burtynsky on climate, abstraction, and hanging photos like paintings', *British Journal of Photography*, available at: {https://www.1854.photography/2024/02/edward-burtynsky-saatchi-gallery-extraction-abstraction-interview/}, accessed 10 January 2025.

[49] Alexandra Pereira, 'Discovering the divine spirit of samba on an alternative tour of Rio', Service 95, available at: {https://www.service95.com/samba-tour-rio}, accessed 20 December 2025; Luana Ferreira, 'A samba queen's guide to Rio de Janeiro', *BBC*, available at: {https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20250221-a-samba-queens-guide-to-rio-de-janeiro}, accessed 20 December 2025.

[50] See Lola Frost, 'Aesthetics and politics', *Global Society*, 24:3 (2010), pp. 433–43; Vivienne Jabri, 'Restyling the subject of responsibility in international relations', *Millennium*, 27:3 (1998), pp. 591–611 (p. 607); Claes Belfrage and Earl Gammon, 'Aesthetic international political economy', *Millennium*, 45:2 (2016), pp. 223–32 (p. 223); Cerwyn Moore and Laura J. Shepherd, 'Aesthetics and international relations: Towards a global politics', *Global Society*, 24:3 (2010), pp. 299–309; Prem Kumar Rajaram, 'Theodor Adorno's aesthetic understanding: An ethical method for IR?', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 27:3 (2002), pp. 351–72.

[51] Gi-Wook Shin and Rennie J. Moon, 'South Korea after impeachment', *Journal of Democracy*, 28:4 (2017), pp. 117–31 (p. 117).

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power', leading to the 'Candlelight Revolution'. Demonstrations advocating for political accountability prompted the National Assembly to vote in favour of impeaching Park Geun-Hye on 9 December 2016.[52] A cumulative total of sixteen million people gathered in Seoul, calling for justice, and over this period, twenty-three Saturday night candlelight protest events took place in total, demanding the impeachment of Park Geun-Hye.[53] Several months later, on 10 March 2017, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Korea unanimously affirmed this decision with an 8–0 ruling. Public protests, the legislature votes, and the judicial decisions held the executive branch of government accountable.[54] Eventually, Park was removed from office in a non-violent manner.[55]

Given the brutal and violent nature of past public demonstrations in South Korea, such as the Gwanju Uprising, the utilisation of candlelight in the protests holds significance, as they were inherently opposed to the violence. With the emergence of the protests with candlelight, demonstrations that resulted in violent confrontations with tear gas and Molotov cocktails were replaced by a peaceful platform.[56]

The beginning of candlelight protests as a defining feature of South Korean mass demonstrations dates back to 1992, when users of the communications service HiTEL protested the introduction of service fees.[57] Yet, it was not until the 2000s, particularly during the demonstrations opposing the impeachment of the late President Roh Moo-hyun and the protests against US imported beef, that it emerged as a significant feature of public protest. In 2002, when it was used in demonstrations in response to the tragic deaths of two teenage girls, Shim Mison and Shin Hyosoon, who were struck and killed by a US military vehicle during a training exercise near Seoul, it became a ritualised[58] aesthetic of the public demonstrations. Initially overshadowed by the national euphoria surrounding South Korea's performance in the Korea–Japan World Cup, the incident gained public attention as information of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA)[59] granting jurisdiction over the case to the US military, rather than Korean authorities, began to circulate online. After the US court-martial pronounced the soldiers involved not guilty, public outrage intensified and prompted widespread protests framing the tragedy as emblematic of the broader consequences of the US military presence in South Korea. Consequently, an online candlelight vigil evolved into a large-scale demonstration in Gwanghwamun Square to commemorate the victims.[60] The candlelight symbolised resistance in response to the perceived injustice inflicted on a victimised nation, as well as peace and a means for collective agency through triumph and prevailing over Gwanghwamun

[52]Paul Chang, 'Candlelight protests in South Korea: The legacies of authoritarianism and democratization', *Ewha Journal of Social Sciences,* 34:1 (2018), pp. 5–18.

[53]Jai Kwan Jung, 'The candlelight protests in South Korea: A dynamics of contention approach', *Social Movement Studies*, 22:2 (2022), pp. 1–19.

[54]Chang, 'Candlelight protests in South Korea', p. 7.

[55]Choe Sang-Hun, 'South Korea removes President Park Geun-hye', *New York Times* (9 March 2017), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/world/asia/park-geun-hye-impeached-south-korea.html}, accessed 10 January 2025.

[56]Sun-Chul Kim, 'South Korea's candlelight protests', *East Asia Forum* (7 February 2017), available at: {https://eastasiaforum.org/2017/02/07/south-koreas-candlelight-protests/}, accessed 20 December 2024.

[57]Shin Min Hee, 'Taking to the streets: The evolution of Korea's rally culture', *Korea JoongAng Daily* (20 December 2024), available at: {https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2024-12-20/culture/features/Taking-to-the-streets-The-evolution-of-Koreas-rally-culture/2204443}, accessed 20 December 2024.

[58]See Maria Mälksoo, 'A ritual approach to deterrence: I am, therefore I deter', *European Journal of International Relations,* 27:1 (2021), pp. 53–78; and Ty Solomon, 'Up in the air: Ritualized atmospheres and the global Black Lives Matter movement', *European Journal of International Relations*, 29:3 (2023), pp. 576–601.

[59]The US–ROK Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), signed in 1966 and in force since 1967, regulates the legal status of US military personnel stationed in South Korea. Under its jurisdictional provisions, the United States retains primary jurisdiction over offences committed by US service members in the performance of official duty, a clause that has long been a source of political and public controversy in South Korea. Critics of the agreement view the SOFA as a reflection of the unequal relationship between Korea and the United States. See Youngjin Jung and Jun-Shik Hwang, 'Where does inequality come from? An analysis of the Korea–United States Status of Forces Agreement', *American University International Law Review*, 18:5 (2003), pp. 1103–44.

[60]Jiyeon Kang, 'Coming to terms with "unreasonable" global power: The 2002 South Korean candlelight vigils', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 6:2 (2009), pp. 171–92 (p. 172).

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Square. In addition, it was a symbol of people who do not reproduce violence as a response to violence.[61]

When the corruption case of Park Geun-Hye erupted in 2016, one of the participants in the protests related in an interview that she was, at the time, a senior college student and the recipient of a scholarship from the President Roh Moo Hyun Foundation. With other scholarship recipients, she organised voluntary gatherings to engage in social activism and resist the government's actions. Together they took part in the candlelight movements, and she attended every demonstration during that period. She emphasised that the candlelight itself carried a significant historical and cultural meaning, drawing a parallel between the candlelight protests and traditional peasant uprisings during the Joseon dynasty, in which torches were used as symbols of resistance. In her view, protests with candlelight were not simply an aesthetic of dissent but also initiated a period of peaceful and non-violent modes of political expression in Korean society.[62]

Another participant in the protests, Lee Hwan-min, stated that 'Politicians might not have feared us before, but the people have shown their strength, and I hope they now govern with some concern for what we think'. In his interview with Arirang News, Yoon Da-han stated, 'I'm so happy that the last six weeks of historic protests have not gone to waste. I hope it can lead to a fair and just society in Korea.'[63] Another participant, Kim Joo-hee, reflected that 'Darkness is normally associated with bad things, but by lighting candles one by one, it's become a bright light in the darkness. I believe that's the meaning behind the candle.'[64] According to singer and songwriter Choi Gonne, the protesters were trying to find hope in the darkness, stating that 'chanting with the people, what pierced me through was not their anger but their power and dedication to carve out their own destiny'.[65] These interviews demonstrate the affective consequences of hope through aesthetic experience. They point to a hope for a different future, as participants imagine and envision it through the collective, affective, and embodied aesthetic experience of holding the candlelights. As a collective aesthetic experience, holding the candlelights together with other participants during the protests created a collective affective atmosphere that uplifted the participants' spirits. In this process, what is normally understood as an anxiety-generating or critical situation is thus transformed into a hopeful one. Therefore, the embodied and affective aesthetic experience of candlelight enabled participants to feel ontologically secure and politically empowered to change things in the moment of crisis. Even though participants initially came together to protest out of anxiety, the experience of the candlelights, along with the masses, enabled them to be present in that moment with the hope of creating a meaningful, future-oriented narrative for their nation.

Building on these individual experiences of hope, labour lawyer Lee Jong-ran emphasised the broader societal impact in an interview with the *New Yorker*. He noted that the candlelight movement articulated demands for freedom of speech, accountability of the government and the Chaebol, economic redistribution, and workers' rights, and that the movement supported their struggle.[66]

Moreover, media narratives also emphasised a shared sense of hope for change. One report noted that, 'There is a sense of pride among the protesters here about what's been achieved so far. The candlelights are being kept alive as they seek greater change for Korea. Millions of Koreans coming together to bring about a change by lighting a candle in the darkness.'[67]

[61] Kang, 'Coming to terms with "unreasonable" global power', p. 184.

[62] Interview conducted with a candlelight movement participant on 28 April 2025, online.

[63] Arirang News, 'Impeachment vote was just the beginning for protesters in Seoul', YouTube, available at: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ENLfWAKYu8}, accessed 9 December 2025.

[64] Arirang News, 'Seoul's candlelight protests from the ground', YouTube, available at: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSxZoA7On8A}, accessed 9 December 2025.

[65] Hong Dam-young, 'Choi Gonne reflects on last year's "Candlelight Revolution" in "Highlander"', *Korea Herald*, available at: {https://www.koreaherald.com/article/1526026}, accessed 10 December 2025.

[66] E. Tammy Kim, 'A new moment for South Korea', *New Yorker*, available at: {https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-new-moment-for-south-korea}, accessed 7 June 2025.

[67] Arirang News, 'Seoul's candlelight protests from the ground'.

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Similarly, within political circles, reflections on the mass mobilisations that led to the impeachment of Park Geun-Hye illustrate the affective impacts of these collective actions. Moon Jae-in, who was serving as a representative of the Democratic Party of Korea at the time before becoming president, stated, 'Parliamentary impeachment of Park wouldn't have happened if citizens didn't light up their candles', and added, 'South Koreans are writing a new history today, with the candles. The parliament's impeachment of Park is the beginning of a great civil "candle" revolution that will lead our country into a better future.'[68] He framed the demonstrations with candlelight as not only acts of protest but also a historical turning point and an emergent civic revolution through which South Koreans were actively scripting a more hopeful and democratic future.

In recent years, the aesthetics of the protests evolved from candles to light sticks, particularly during demonstrations against Yoon Seok Yeol, following dismissive remarks by Kim Jin-tae, then a prosecutor and a member of the National Assembly known for his loyalty to President Park Geun-hye and the Saenuri Party, who stated that 'The candlelights will eventually go out when the wind blows'.[69] In this context, the aesthetics of candlelight emerged as a symbol for the collective desire for political change. The candle itself serves as an aesthetic symbol, yet the act of holding candlelight becomes an aesthetic experience as people holding it actively engage in an embodied encounter with sensory and emotional qualities, collectively hoping and imagining political transformation. Therefore, the experience of the aesthetics of the candlelights represented hope and aspirations for a hopeful future with improved conditions. Put differently, aesthetics became a critical phenomenon that inspires and mobilises, or can drive collective action.

The candlelight protests were crucial to South Korean citizens' sense of self as an earned democracy through struggle, particularly in the late 1980s, when participants viewed themselves as curators of democracy. Moreover, this act of reclaiming agency had a deeper meaning and threaded itself into a longer history in which Korean citizens had sought to recover their agency through resisting colonisation, rebuilding a shattered sense of home after the Korean War, and, in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis, contributing their personal gold to help revive a collapsing economy. In this context, protesters were practicing their temporal reflexivity and imagining and enacting a hopeful future. This reflexive agency is linked to aspirations in its forward-orientedness. Through this collective act of protest, South Korean citizens recreated their coherent sense of self. In this sense, the creation of a sensory and spatial atmosphere through participants' act of holding a candle and standing together led to a moment of embodied visioning and collective aspiration towards a just and democratic society. In such a setting, ontological security took a perceptible form through the aesthetic experience of holding candlelights and aspirational performative identities. Therefore, the candlelight experience enacted the political ethos that the participants desired for the future. In that sense, aesthetics is an embodied and affective encounter that shapes political subjectivity.[70] The candlelight protests further illuminate an aesthetic understanding of agency and power, in which the aesthetic itself materialised political agency; through this aesthetic enactment, Park was removed and political power transformed. In this sense, the candlelight protests were constitutive of the conditions under which political agency became both imaginable and collectively sustainable. Anger alone does not necessarily lead to political transformation when deprived of the capacity to envision a different future. Hope, on the other hand, is intrinsically imaginative and possesses mobilising power. The emergence of collective coping mechanisms through such aesthetic experiences during the protests allowed participants

[68]Ock Hyun-Ju, 'Candle revolution: How candles led to Park's impeachment', *Korea Herald*, available at: {https://www.koreaherald.com/article/1172149}, accessed 7 June 2025.

[69]Shin Min-Hee, 'Taking to the streets'.

[70]Ty Solomon, 'Ontological security, circulations of affect, and the Arab Spring', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21 (2018), pp. 934–58.

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to transform anger into hope and sustain collective action in the face of enduring injustice and corruption.[71]

Moreover, as my interviewee who organised participation in the protests alongside other young students pointed out during the interview, the younger generation came to see themselves as heirs to a legacy of democratisation and bearers of a future democratic possibility. Through those aesthetic experiences, a sense of an ongoing and future-oriented self across time and space, a temporal bridge between the past and the future, was constructed. Yet, simultaneously, this intertwined temporal imagination also remained distinguished from the immediate present.

Conclusion: Aesthetics of becoming, aesthetics as becoming

In this paper, I contemplated the relationship between aesthetics and ontological security: the role of aesthetics in our experience of being in the world, aspirational modes of being, and how we imagine ourselves in the future. I considered the role of aesthetics in relation to security as we move towards future uncertainties, as well as its role in hope and positive images of the future, including future ideal states, political life, and political society. This led to an investigation into how agency and power can be understood through aesthetics, examining their connection to political power and the ways in which aesthetics itself can function as a form of agency. In this regard, I conceptualised aesthetics as a notion that consists of our experiences and perceptions of our being in the world, with the potential to challenge and disrupt the status quo, prompting creativity and potentially driving radical transformations, also in hopeful ways. Instead of simply extending the present into the future in a linear manner, aesthetics can inspire a reimagining of the self. While this process may remain constrained by existing narratives, it also opens the door to reinterpretation and the development of new perspectives. In this way, building on philosophical theoretical foundations, the concept of aesthetic agency emerges as not only a hopeful avenue for coping with or embracing anxiety, driving towards desired modes of being and spaces, but also a means of 'nurturing growth',[72] as it creates something anew rather than just coping with something old or present. In this regard, I argue that aesthetics becomes not only a means of hiding insecurities or coping with anxiety but also a stimulus for aspiration, driving us towards our envisioned secure beings and spaces.

Building on these discussions, the following areas could be explored through an aesthetic perspective on creating ontological security. This includes the ways in which one's past and present stances within a social structure relate to one's meaning-making practices;[73] in what ways a nation-state forms an identity, self-creates through the aesthetic manifestation of the self, and enacts its emancipatory agency through an aspiration to obtain some other identity; and the ways aesthetics offers the possibility of serving as a sensory and spatial context in which routines of a political actor's existence are performed. Furthermore, how do postcolonial and post-imperial nation-states, in particular, mobilise aesthetics to progress towards their envisioned futures?

Ontological security has long been focused on continuity and stability, yet this framework increasingly demands re-examination in light of disruptions and anxieties. By incorporating aesthetics and creativity into the conversation, I aimed to highlight how these elements offer optimistic, transformative possibilities beyond the constraints of routine and stability. In that sense, aesthetics also emerges as an aspirational and hopeful phenomenon capable of creating ontological security, shaping how we manifest our beings in the future, and inspiring collective action. Not only through routines but also in such moments of experience, we can find meaning that speaks to our idea of coherent sense of self. It is important to reflect on the extent to which it is possible

[71]Youllee Kim, 'Channeling anger into hope', in JongHwa Lee, Chuyun Oh, and Yong-Chan Kim (eds), *The Candlelight Movement, Democracy, and Communication in Korea* (Routledge, 2022), pp.69–83.

[72]Jason Ralph, 'Securing the self, embracing anxiety, or nurturing growth? How the pragmatism of Dewey, James, and Mead speaks to ontological security studies', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4:2 (2024), pp. 1–11.

[73]Vincent Pouliot, 'Methodology', in Rebecca Adler-Nissen (ed.), *Bourdieu in International Relations: Rethinking Key Concepts in IR* (Routledge, 2012), pp. 45–59 (p. 46).

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to establish routines in particular political turning points, and how we should respond when we are denied the opportunity to build such routines and structures of continuity. Historically, despite its potential to awaken enriching sensibilities, aesthetics has been co-opted in the service of fascist projects. As a result, what should inspire us is burdened with intellectually fraught connotations. Similarly, today, in various parts of the world, we are again witnessing the mobilisation of aesthetic forms for authoritarian ends. Public funding for the arts is declining,[74] and we are observing a turn towards technocratic rationalities. Given all this, aesthetics stands for more than a symbolic form and plays a significant role in 'transformative politics, reflexivity and emotive agency'.[75]

Aesthetics is also closely bound to the change of that aesthetic experience. It is a function of change and disruption of something beautiful. What we once found aesthetic may change through saturation or boredom. And yet, aesthetics itself may disrupt and unsettle the aesthetic, eventually changing the way we engage with the world in relation to aesthetics. Therefore, it is a function of change instead of a still state of experience. At the same time, aesthetics gestures towards constancy, as it is the hopeful and sensory experience of being in the world and how we perceive it. As humans, we will always experience or require it as long as we remain in the world. Therein lies an inherent tension, as change can be constant and constants can change.[76]

Additionally, I do not adopt a perspective that aesthetics will always give us hope or positive feelings. Aesthetics also may draw us into despair. Consider, for example, Republican aesthetics, particularly embodied in prison footage where Kristi Noem appears before El Salvador's CECOT, with her particular choice of makeup, hair, and watch, and what this experience makes some of us feel. I argue that aesthetic experience can be found everywhere, yet one has agency when encountering it, as long as we are not deprived of the ability to make meaningful decisions. But what preoccupies me is the intervention itself, as to how the aesthetic, however unsettling, contributes meaning to our lives through the experience of it. In our field, where we have been exhaustively covering war, terror, trauma, and anxiety, what might it mean to remain open to aesthetic experience, and what would this entail in our future-orientedness?

Our engagement and interactions with aesthetics influence our sense of self and ontological security, which can in turn guide how we act in the world. Aesthetics is an experience for us. It is the combination of our phenomenological perception or embodied experience[77] that, at the same time, gives us hope and makes us see the world differently, perhaps in a way more empathetically. Therefore, a phenomenological understanding of aesthetics opens a space for a greater reflexivity and, in turn, for new political imaginaries. And, as Rancière argues, aesthetics opens a space in which freedom can emerge.[78] We should not discard it, as it may provide political power in a positive sense. And, reflecting on Burtynsky leading us to ask where in the unfolding narrative we are by showing us the coral reef, how should we, as both IR scholars[79] and political subjectivities, make use of this in an increasingly disheartening, polarised world where we increasingly share the same space, yet grow isolated?

[74]Jennifer Schuessler, 'Arts endowment cuts grants dedicated to underserved communities', *New York Times* (7 February 2025), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/07/arts/national-endowment-for-the-arts-trump.html?searchResultPosition=3}, accessed 10 April 2025.

[75]Pauline Heinrichs, 'Climate change and the production of ontological security: Towards transformative politics, reflexivity and emotive agency', *European Journal of International Security*, (2026).

[76]I am grateful to Pauline Heinrichs for this point.

[77]Shaun Gallagher, *Performance/Art*, (Mimesis International, 2021).

[78]Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (Verso, 2013).

[79]See Jelena Subotic, 'Scholars and the politics of international art restitution', *Contemporary European History*, 32:1 (2023), pp. 33–7 (pp. 36–7). Subotic emphasises the role of scholars (particularly in the field of art restitution and in cases concerning artworks taken during the Holocaust) as they are an essential part for conducting accurate research in the place of origin and shaping ethical standards and practices for future practices. Furthermore, scholars are increasingly needed to participate in public discourse, drawing on their knowledge to challenge misinformation, promote ethical practices, and use 'knowledge, expertise, skills and methods' to fight against 'nihilistic forces of nativism, populism and racism'.

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